DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 229 125 PS 013 480

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TITLE Sex-Role Development and Father-Absence: Comparing Meta-Analyses.
PUB DATE May 83
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (Chicago, IL, May 5-7, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; Comparative Analysis; *Fatherless Family; *Sex Differences; *Sex Role
IDENTIFIERS Meta Analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of meta-analysis of the literature addressing the effects of father-absence on both male and female sex-role development. Considering both published and unpublished papers, the analysis involved 33 studies of males and 16 studies of females which become available between 1958 and 1982 and which studied father-absence due to death, divorce, or desertion. Results indicated that while the effects of father-absence on boys were significant to those under 6 years of age, no significant differences were found to be associated with the age of the female subjects. In addition, significant effects appeared to be related to specific measures used in different studies. When compared to father-present children, it appeared that father-absent males were less masculine and father-absent females were more feminine according to measure of sex role preference. However, according to measures of sex-role adoption father-absent boys were more masculine, while father-absent girls were less feminine. (MP)

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Sex-Role Development and Father-Absence: Comparing Meta-Analyses

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Paper Presented at Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, Illinois
May 5-7, 1983

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According to many thoeries, adequate fathering is necessary for optimal sex-role development in both sons and daughters. Yet, the results of empirical studies of father absence and sex-role development have been inconsistent. Although several authors (Biller, 1971, 1974; Hetherington & Deur, 1971) agree that father absence disrupts the sex-role development of preschool-aged boys, Herzog and Sudia (1973) concluded that on the basis of available evidence no well supported conclusions could be made. Their 1973 review dealt primarily with the effects on males. Most of the data on females have been gathered since that time.

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This paper reports the results of meta-analyses of the literature addressing the effects of father-absence on both male and female sex-role development. Meta-analysis is a quantitative alternative to a narrative review and allows for the statistical analysis of the findings of many individual analyses. Meta-analytic techniques give researchers the tools necessary for detecting systematic relationships between outcomes and subject, or study attributes. Meta-analysis takes into consideration not only whether or not a difference was found, but also considers the magnitude of differences between groups. Such analysis also allows a researcher to describe an effect that may only be present among a subset of experiments employing subjects of methods with particular attributes.

For these meta-analyses, an attempt was made to retrieve every available study designed to compare father-absent and father-present children on some

dimension of sex-role development. Considering both published and unpublished papers, we included 33 studies of males and 16 studies of females which became available between 1958 and 1982 and which studied father absence due to death, divorce, or desertion. For each study an attempt was made to compute an effect size with the d statistic (Glass, et al, 1981). In cases where the original reference merely reported that the difference between the groups did not reach statistical significance, effect sizes were given a value of zero.

Many of the studies included in these analyses used more than one measure of sex-role development. As a result, 47 unbiased estimates of effect size and 12 reports of no effect (d=0) were obtained for males while 17 unbiased estimates of effect size and 10 reports of no effect were obtained for females. Analyses considered here were calculated for the entire sample of effect sizes including the estimates of no effect.

Let us first consider findings for males. The average effect size for the entire sample (d=-0.160) was significantly different from zero. On the surface, this indicates that father-absent boys were less masculine than father-present boys. However, it would be inappropriate to conclude that father absence affects all aspects of sex-role development in the same way, since we also found that the effect and its size varied systematically with several important variables.

Significant differences were found to be associated with the age of the subject. Mean effect size for the 10 studies whose subjects were no more than 5 years of age (d=-0.5772) was significantly larger than the mean effect size for studies of older subjects. In fact, the average effect size for studies of older subjects did not differ significantly from zero (d=-0.075, N=49). This suggests that the effect of father absence

is confined to boys less than 6 years of age.

Significant differences were also found to be associated with the aspect of sex-role measured. Three major aspects of sex-role have been differentiated in the past. Twenty-two studies used measures of sex-role orientation. Sex-role orientation has been defined as the underlying perception and evaluation of oneself as male or female. The average effect size associated with sex-role orientation was not significantly different from zero (d=-0.1323). Sex-role preference, usually the preference for sex-appropriate toys and activities, was examined in 30 studies, and these did produce a significant mean effect size (d=-0.3103). This suggests that father-absent boys were less masculine according to measures of sex-role preference. Seven studies measured sex-role adoption, the masculinity or femininity or one's overt behavior as exemplified in such behaviors as aggression and independence. These produced a significant effect size (d=0.3960) that suggests that father-absent boys were more masculine.

Borduin and Henggeller (in press) have proposed that the distinction between orientation, preference and adoption may have been the result of variations in the type of measure used rather than a reflection of any underlying aspect of sex-role development. Therefore, mean effect size was disaggregated by the type of measure used.

The IT Scale for Children was considered separately since some consider it a measure of orientation while others consider it a measure of preference. This test shows children a stick figure and asks them to select for IT pictures of toys and activities. The average effect size for the 11 studies using this measure (d=-0.4616) was significantly different from zero and suggests that boys living in mother-headed, single-parent families were

less masculine than boys in intact families. The average effect size for choice tasks was also significant (d=-0.2525, N=20) and suggests that father-absent boys make sex-typed choices less often than father-present boys. This is consistent with results based on the IT Scale. Three groups of measures produced no significant effects. These included self concept scales such as the Bem Sex Role Inventory and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (d=-0.2176, N=8), projective measures, such as the Draw-a-person and the Franck Drawing Completion Test (d=-0.0733, N=7), and measures utilizing semantic differentials (d=0.0275, N=6). Finally, observational rating scales were used for the 7 studies that measured sex-role adoption. As was reported earlier, these studies produced a significant mean effect size that suggests that father-absent boys were more masculine than father-present boys. Specifically, this suggests that father-absent boys are rated as more aggressive, disobedient and independent when compared to father-present boys.

Similar analyses were completed on studies of females. The average effect size for the entire sample (d=-.0014) was not significantly different from zero. However, basing conclusions on this estimate may be misleading due to significant differences found in subsets of these data. Even though statistically significant, some of the following results were based on very small sample sizes, as in other empirical research such findings must be interpreted with caution.

Unlike the analysis on males, no significant differences were found to be associated with the age of the subject. However, as with males, there was an effect associated with aspect of sex-role measured. Although 14 studies that used measures of orientation produced a non-significant mean effect size (d=-0.0839), measures of preference, used in 11 studies

did produce a significant mean effect size (d=0.1925). This suggests that father-absent girls choose sex-appropriate toys more often than father-present girls. That is, they are more stereotypically feminine in sex-role preference. Measures of sex-role adoption, used in 2 studies, also produced a significant mean effect size (d=-0.4910) and suggests that father-absent females are less feminine than father-present females when looking at overt behaviors such as passivity.

Let us now consider differences associated with the type of measure used. None were found to be associated with the IT Scale for Children (d=0.1075, N=4), with projective measures (d=0.1450, N=2) or with self concept scales (d=-0.0805, N=8). In contrast, the average mean effect size for choice tasks used in 8 studies was significant (d=0.2752) and suggests that father-absent girls make more sex-typed choices than father-present girls, or as some would state are more feminine. Measures utilizing semantic differentials, used in 3 studies, produced a significant mean effect size (d=-0.4450) that suggests that father-absent females are less feminine. Finally as was reported earlier, the 2 studies of sex-role adoption used behavior ratings which produced a significant mean effect size (d=-0.4910). This suggests that when compared to father-present girls father-absent girls are rated as less submissive and less passive and are therefore said to be less feminine.

To summarize, the results of these analyses suggest that the effects of father absence are not as pervasive as theory indicates. First, results suggest that effects on boys are restricted to those under the age of 6. Further significant effects appear to be related to specific measures. When compared to father-present children, it appears that father-absent males are less masculine and father-absent females are more feminine according

to measures of sex-role preference. However, according to measures of sex-role adoption father-absent boys are more masculine, while father-absent girls are less feminine.

According to the major theories of sex-role development, children acquire appropriate sex-roles through modeling or identification with the same-sex parent. These theories can easily account for the present findings in regard to sex-role preference. However, these theories do not predict the present findings in regard to sex-role adoption. One possible interpretation of these results is that they do not reflect a disruption in sex role adoption but instead indicate a more generalized response to a stressful situation. That boys behave in a more aggressive fashion while girls appear less passive may be an indication of "acting-out" behavior often found in children under stress.

This presentation is best considered as a report of research in progress, since questions raised by these results are now being followed up with further meta-analytic study. First, some studies have reported the age of the child when the absence occurred. We are returning to the original data to see if enough information is available to consider this variable. Second, data from some studies will also allow us to compare the effects of various reasons for father absence to see if they have a differential effect on the offspring's sex-role development. In this regard we will also consider studies where fathers were absent due to military service. Third, the reliability estimates of sex-role measures will be gathered and used in determining the quality of particular studies and will aid in the interpretation of the results of the present analyses. Finally, findings reported here were the result of considering several important variables in independent analyses. Future analyses will consider these

variables simultaneously in order to determine which variable or combination of variables account for the results reported.

By completing a thorough meta-analysis of this literature and adding studies which have appeared in the last year, we think we will be able to draw some rather specific conclusions concerning the effects of father-absence. In doing so, perhaps we can help dispell the once pervasive belief that father-absence is necessarily detrimental to appropriate sex-role development. In addition, like more traditional reviews, meta-analysis may show us where future research in this area should be directed.

Finally, a few words of caution. It seems likely that findings from past studies of sex-role development in father-absent children will not provide evidence bearing on the issue of the importance of the father in child development. Since the inception of this approach, views of the father-absent family have changed. Fathers, whether present or absent, vary tremendously in their involvement with children. The father's presence in the home does not guarantee a strong father-son relationship nor does the father's absence by divorce necessarily prevent it. More generally, our understanding of sex roles is also in flux. At the present time a simple definition or measure of sex role is not available; further, agreement as to the nature of "appropriate sex-role development" is not universal. However, these qualifications do not lessen the importance of research on the effects of father absence, but may lead to the use of paradigms that are theoretically and methodologically more sound.

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